



AREF Leadership Programmes Report

AREF 10th Anniversary Impact Evaluation
May 2025

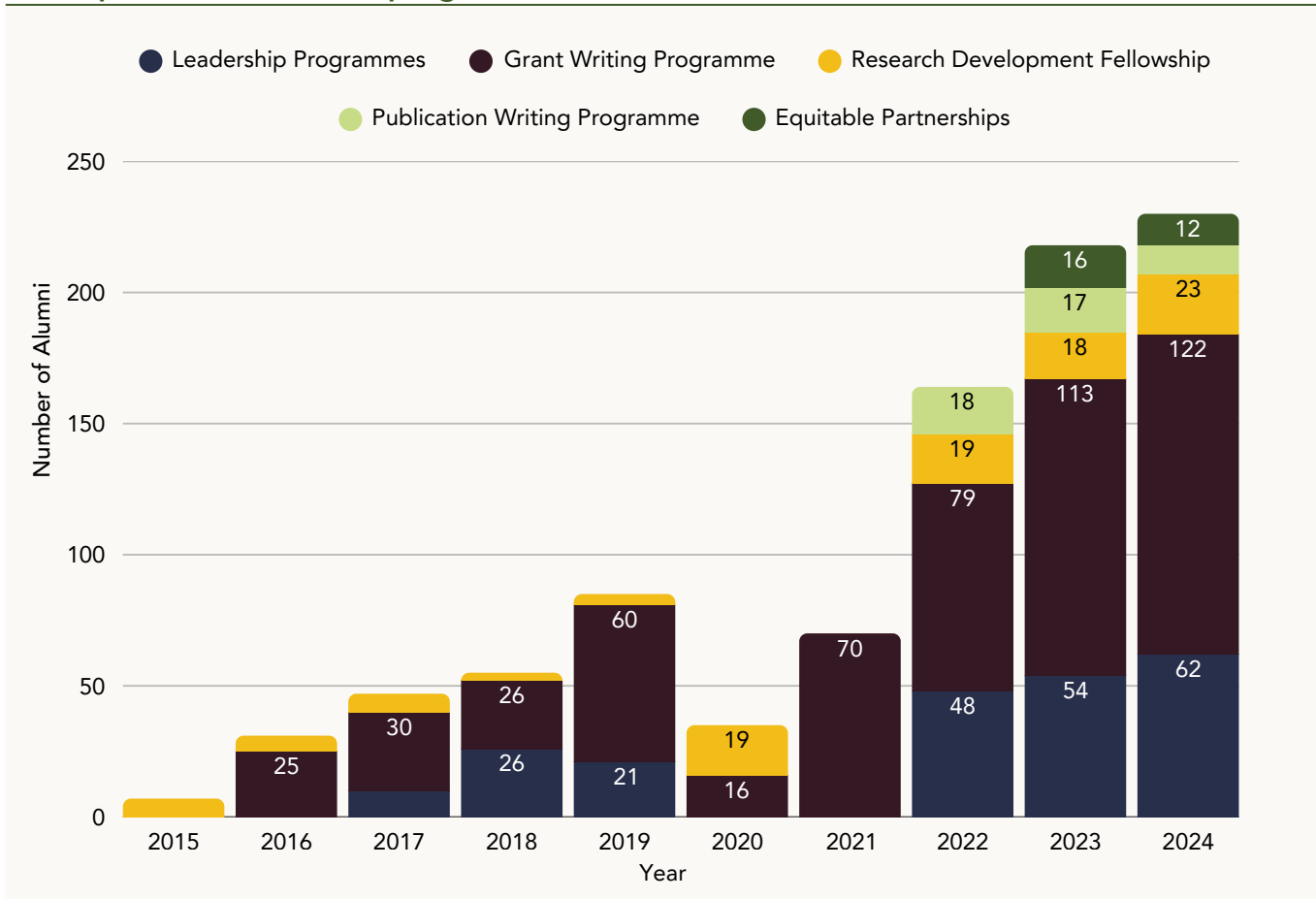
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About the Leadership Programmes

The AREF Leadership Programmes (LPs) equip emerging African scientists with the leadership skills, mentorship, and networks they need to transition to research independence and secure major global health research funding. Through structured activities and workshops, participants develop a comprehensive understanding of effective leadership that is tailored to meet the evolving demands of various institutions and global research.

AREF offers a variety of leadership programmes, each with its own unique focus and target audience. Since its inception in 2015, AREF has trained 200 leadership participants, representing 21.3% of all AREF alumni.

Participation across AREF programmes (2015 - 2024)



Key Leadership Programmes include:

- 1. Excell Researcher and Leadership Development Programme (commenced in 2018):** Designed for early to mid-career researchers from African universities and research institutions and focused on strengthening researcher and institutional research capacity.
- 2. Towards Leadership Programme (commenced in 2019):** Empowers early to mid-stage researchers with core leadership skills to advance their careers and drive impactful research.
- 3. Women in Research Leadership Programme (commenced in 2022):** Exclusive to African women researchers in the early to mid-stage of their research careers, this programme develops their leadership skills to bridge gender gaps in African research leadership.

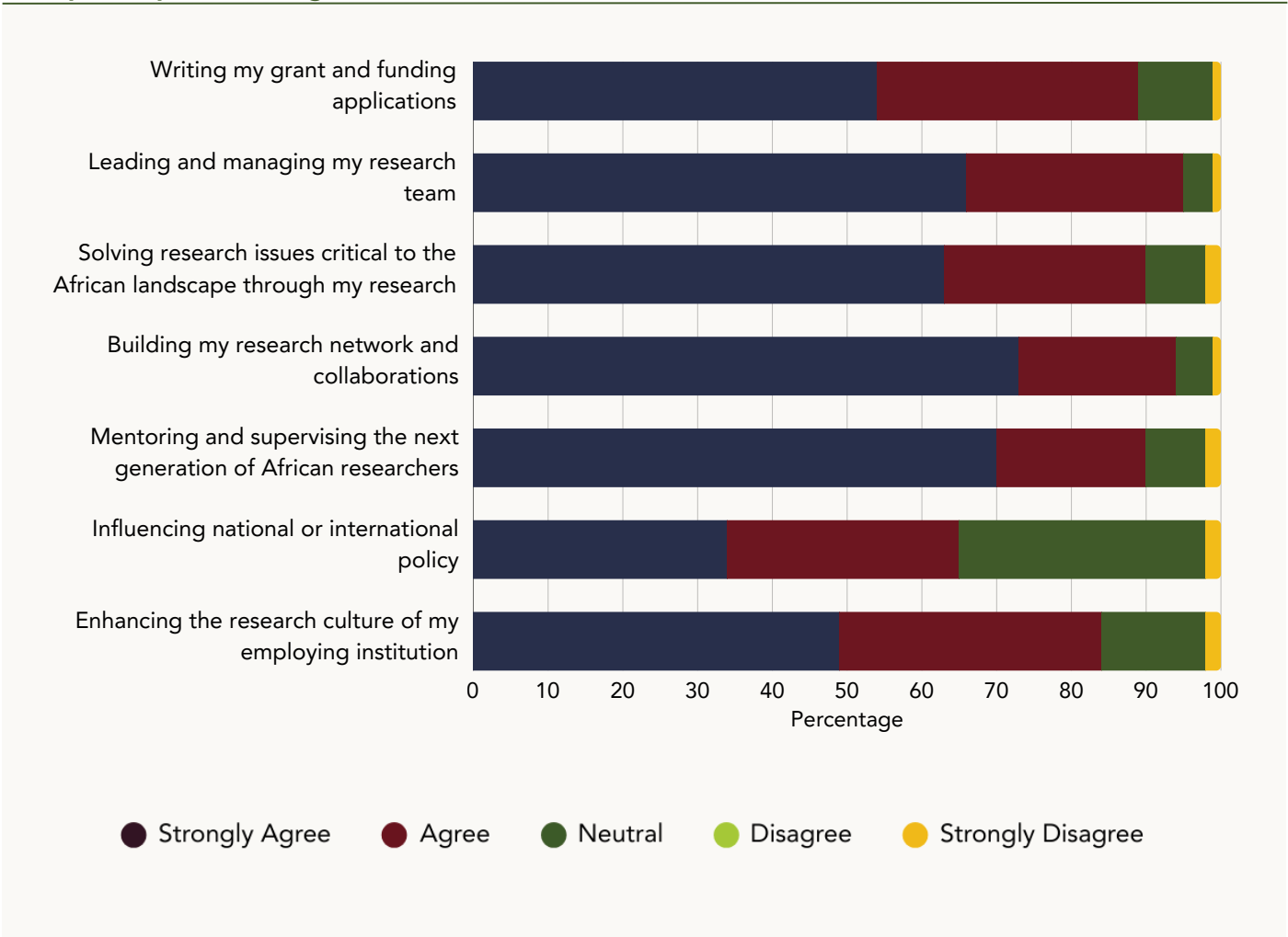
About the Leadership Programmes

All estimates in the impact section below were derived from an impact survey which was responded to by 77 LP Alumni.

LP participants overwhelmingly reported gaining essential skills from the programme:

- 94.3% agreed that the programme enhanced their ability to build and manage research teams.
- 93.1% felt it strengthened their capacity to establish research networks and collaborations.
- 89.3% noted improvements in writing grant and funding applications.
- 88.6% agreed it improved their mentoring and supervisory skills for the next generation of African researchers.
- 88.2% highlighted its relevance in addressing research challenges critical to the African landscape.
- 82.8% reported a positive impact on enhancing the research culture within their employing institution.
- 65.5% acknowledged that it supported their ability to influence national or international policy.

LP participants rating of skills usefulness

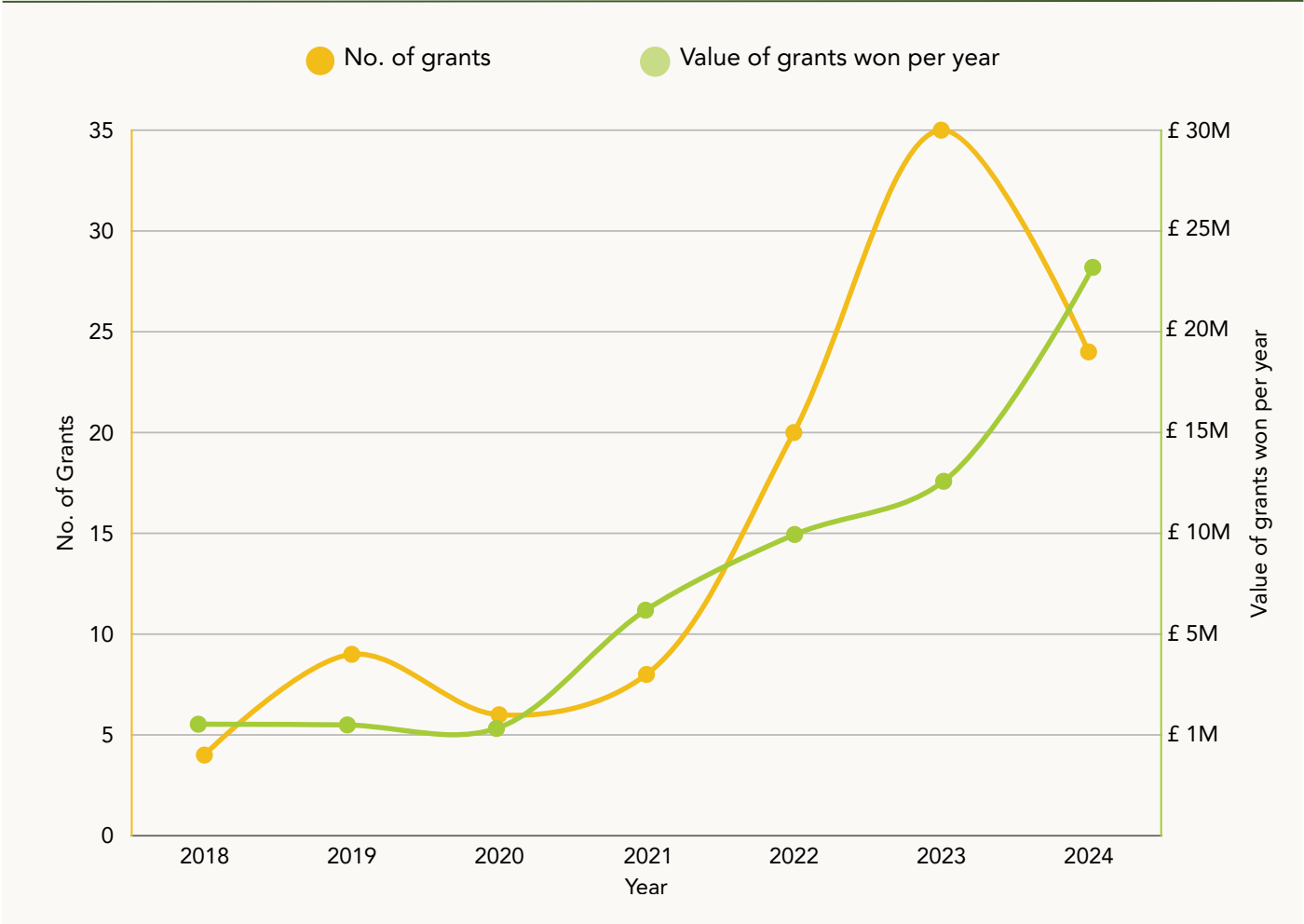


The impact of AREF’s LP is reflected in its participants’ career progression, grant success, and publication achievements. At the start of their journey, 81.8% (n=63) of alumni were MSc/PhD students or early career researchers, while 13% (n=10) were in mid-career role. The impact evaluation survey revealed commendable career growth, with 49.4% (n=38) now at mid-career and 6.5% (n=5) at senior positions. Notably 35.7% of LP alumni experienced upwards career progression - moving from early to mid, or mid to senior - within five years.

Among AREF LP alumni, 43% reported having received at least one successful grant with a median of 3. The total value of grants attributed to the LP alumni amounted to £58,391,963, which was a third of all grant funding received from the AREF survey respondents. This figure also includes one of the largest grants, valued at £20 million, that was received by an individual who participated in both the Research Development fellowship (RDF) and LP. The median grant value was £78,655 (£26,115, £304,066).

LP participants also reported substantial growth in their research output. The total number of publications increased after participation in a LP, both for publications as a first or last author from median of 6 to 8 and any author from 13 to 17.5. The H-index (an author-level metric that measures both the productivity and citation impact of the publications by an author) of leadership participants had a median of 12 with a range from 2 to 28.

The number and value of grants won by LP alumni



Case Study: Dr. Valerie Makoge

Advancing Leadership for Women in Research

Dr. Valerie Makoge, a Senior Research Officer at the Institute of Medical Research and Medicinal Plant Studies in Cameroon, participated in AREF's Women in Research Leadership (WiRL) and Towards Leadership Programmes in 2022. Driven by a passion for leadership and empowering women in research, she sought skills that would help her navigate the challenges of leading in a traditionally hierarchical and patriarchal environment.

Dr. Makoge recognised that leadership skills are not typically taught in formal education, and she wanted to equip herself to become a "new generation leader." Her interest in non-traditional leadership approaches stemmed from the desire to lead effectively without relying on outdated, top-down style. Additionally, she saw the programme as an opportunity to strengthen her ability to support and mentor other women in research, reinforcing her commitment to gender equity.



Key Benefits and Learnings

Dr. Makoge's participation in AREF's leadership programmes proved to be a transformative experience, providing her with invaluable benefits at personal, institutional, and national scales.

On a personal level, the WiRL programme created a safe space where she connected with other women facing similar professional challenges across different countries. This support network became a source of encouragement, allowing her to share her experiences and learn from others who were navigating the same obstacles. Through the programme's action learning component, she honed problem-solving techniques that had immediate, real-world applications. One notable achievement was successfully organising activities for over 100 women at her institution's Women's Day event, an effort that was met with high praise from her Director General. Additionally, the Towards Leadership Programme expanded her professional network, enabling her to collaborate with researchers across Africa and foster meaningful knowledge exchanges that enriched her career.

At an institutional level, Dr. Makoge's newfound leadership skills enhanced her ability to navigate career challenges and become a more effective mentor. She applied these strategies to empower other women in research, creating a ripple effect that strengthened leadership capacity within her institution. Dr. Makoge experienced a shift in her leadership style, incorporating new skills into her role as a laboratory head. She introduced lunch seminars, where she shared insights from the AREF programme with colleagues, particularly focusing on personal development and leadership skills.

On a national scale, her role as Secretary General of the Cameroon Academy of Young Scientists positioned her to influence policy discussions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she leveraged her leadership training to contribute meaningfully to national conversations, ensuring that scientific research played a crucial role in shaping policy responses.

Through her journey with AREF, Dr. Makoge not only grew as a leader but also became a catalyst for change within her institution and the wider scientific community. Dr. Makoge has remained actively involved with AREF by attending AREF webinars and training sessions and contributing as an assessor for applications from new programme cohorts.

To further support women in research leadership, Dr. Makoge suggested:

- Expanding mentorship opportunities to provide more structured guidance for women researchers.
- Increasing engagement with alumni through refresher courses and additional networking events.
- Creating national AREF groups, such as an AREF Cameroon chapter, to extend the programme's impact locally.
- Creating opportunities for alumni to share their research outputs on a dedicated platform.

Conclusion

AREF's leadership programmes are transforming the careers of African scientists, equipping them with the skills, confidence, and networks to lead groundbreaking research, mentor the next generation, and influence policy at national and global levels. Dr. Valerie Makoge's journey is just one example of how AREF alumni are breaking barriers, driving institutional change, and championing equity in research leadership. From securing competitive grants to shaping policy discussions, these leaders are paving the way for a stronger, more inclusive research ecosystem across Africa. The commitment to empowering Africa's brightest scientific minds and helping them thrive as leaders is therefore of the utmost importance as AREF continues to expand its impact across the continent.